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## Book

## Sharing the road during the COVID-19 pandemic



Written in the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, Millicent Borges Accardi's fourth poetry collection *Quarantine highway* examines her experience of isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic opened up a new reality, as life as we knew it was radically transformed. A 'normal' task such as going to a food shop became a minefield of 'Clorox' wipes and hand gel, and surgical masks left operating theatres and entered our daily wardrobe. Writing during a time of radical changes in our daily life, Borges Accardi uses poetry to try to navigate the disorientating and uncertain early months of the pandemic. Her poems focus on how we sought to escape from reality, whilst longing for the pre-pandemic days.

In this anthology, Borges Accardi examines her own quarantine experience. She prefaces her collection with a description of quarantine in 14th century Venice written by authors from the US Centers for Disease Control. When quarantine was first implemented in the Italian city, ships were required to anchor for forty days and those aboard were completely isolated. The contemporary poems that follow consider a markedly different quarantine experience, with an emphasis on the quarantine's unknown future, and the presence of technology in homes.

Initially, Borges Accardi reminds us of those days when we were consigned inside: 'television glued / as news rolled by' (p 5). There are yearnings for pre-pandemic days (*Yes it's difficult*) in which life was 'easy' (p 23). Whilst trapped inside, childhood memories are brought to the surface and Borges Accardi vividly recalls her experiences of previous infections. Graphic details of headlice and chickenpox are recounted in *I told my friend to rub her lice against my hair*. Similarly, in *I made up a story for myself once*, the speaker retreats inward and admits 'where you/ close your eyes and send you/ back to the safe place' (p 72), demonstrating how our imaginations became a distraction from ongoing anxieties.

Fiction, too, became a solace for us at this time. Our 'comfort' lay in 'movies' (p 24) as we took refuge in the imaginary, and readers are reminded of Netflix shows such as *Tiger King* and *Love is Blind* which peaked in popularity during this period (p 19). In *What we Call Time*, we even live vicariously through fiction as we 'watch old/ movies with longing' (p 27). As Borges Accardi illustrates, we lived our lives through screens.

Yet, as a result of this over-consumption, our idling worlds degenerated as we did 'the nonsense/ we knew we

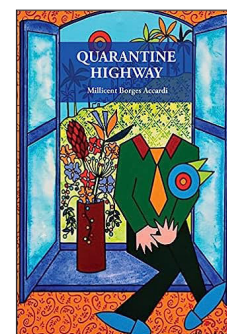
shouldn't:/ over-drinking, board games,/ chanting curses at each other' (p 5). In her final poems, and with the benefit of hindsight, Borges Accardi recalls how vapid these 'board games' then seemed; they lacked the 'richness of reality,/ embodied with a generous sadness' (p 85). The struggle to find a sense of purpose in this time is repeatedly underlined.

As this idling drifts on, Borges Accardi makes us painfully aware of our clumsy, self-conscious attempts to do the right thing. In *Let your eyes slide over the estuary*, her frustrations scream 'I find myself spraying Lysol on the paper/ as if I mean, as if the fuck we don't/ know' (p 24). In the early pandemic days, we performed these rituals in an attempt to keep ourselves safe. But their effectiveness was unclear. The uncertainty of this time is reflected in Borges Accardi's stilted and jolted phrasing. By the end of the collection, the hopelessness of how to navigate this new normal is made clear: 'does anyone really know what is coming next' (p 79).

Many of the poems in this collection were written as a result of discussions Borges Accardi had over Zoom with fellow writers. Others were written as part of Juan Morales' writing challenge for CantoMundo fellows. The effect of this creates a resounding number of voices which filter in, influence, and inspired Borges Accardi's work. Many poems are 'inspired' or 'from a line by' fellow poets—authors such as Elizabeth Acevedo, Pablo Neruda and Javier Zamora. Borges Accardi describes how poetry 'drew us close, reunited our spirits and held our souls safely within our own and each other's isolation' (p 91). The book is a credit to a synthesis of a learning experience where the poets shaped and re-shaped each other's interpretations of a world dominated by COVID-19.

This array of themes experienced by us all is underscored by the self-evident need for connection, companionship, and as Accardi found, a kind of love. In *We still are not breathing*, she tells us that 'Love is not a currency, neither is it an assignment' (p 14). Instead, it is a visceral need, like 'the drinking of water for thirst' (p 14). However we may recall the peak of quarantine, this collection of poems reminds us of how fiction and friendships helped so many of us through uncertain times. *Quarantine highway* gathers almost seventy poems, penned by Borges Accardi and influenced and shaped by a group of writers who drove down this highway together.

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